SALT OF THE EARTH
Matthew 5:1-17
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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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One of the best parts of vacation is that I can do reading that time otherwise doesn't allow. This summer one of the books I read was The Celtic Churches A History, A.D 200 to 1,200 by John T. McNeil. It was a very scholarly book: and reading through the interminable dates and names and places reminded me of that old saw about a little girl who received a book about Penquins as a birthday gift from her grandmother. She read the book and wrote the following note: "Dear Grandma: Thank you very much for the book. It told me more about Penquins than I really wanted to know." Well, I read more about the history of the Celtic Church than I really wanted to know: and yet it was a unique and inspiring story: and I'm glad I took the time. Let me tell you just a little bit about it.

It is a story of literally thousands of men captivated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Ireland in the third and following centuries. In great numbers they founded monasteries and took absolutely literally Jesus' model of poverty and sacrifice. Those monasteries were remarkable places. Education flourished: the Bible was studied: music was composed - and in the process the best of Celtic culture was preserved. The piety of the Celtic monks was so real that in some monasteries the Psalms were chanted by the brothers, singing in shifts, around the clock for decades. Farming flourished - and herding. Metal and stone work, along with very intricate printing were cultivated and taught and passed on. To a barbarian and brutal culture the monasteries brought the idea of peace and compassion. They were easy prey for marauding bands of Vikings, and many monsteries were destroyed and the monks killed several times over.

The really remarkable thing about these early Christians however, was their missionary activities. Traveling alone, or in small bands, they sailed to the islands off Scotland, then to England and finally to the continent, bringing with them the Gospel, the teachings of Jesus, and their gentle and kind way of life. In terms of the history of ideas probably no venture

ever succeeded so well. One by one the barbarian tribes and the emerging kingdoms of Europe became Christianized - as a result of the singular devotion and courage of these celtic monks. It is impossible, from an historian's point of view even to contemplate western civilization apart from the role they played in its founding.

In the epilogue to the book McNeil observes: "The austere and unrelaxed devotion of the Celtic saints is so alien to the modern spirit as to be now almost incomprehensible. We are not familiar with men who chose to subsist on one meal a day, who sleep on hard floors with pillows made of stone, who spend many hours of the day and night singing psalms and hymns, and yet with unfailing energy exercise creative leadership, changing the society in which they move and schooling barborous peoples.... It is wholesome to reflect on the debt of the modern world to these dedicated islanders." (P.223-4)

The author identifies their <u>zest</u> and <u>abandon</u> as the two characteristics that enabled them to be so influential.

Now you know more about Celtic monasteries than you probably wanted to know: yet I shared that information because, having pondered it, I have concluded that the early Celtic monks probably came as close as anyone in history to fulfilling Jesus' most familiar description of his followers: The Salt of the Earth - The Light of the World. As we think about those two images I trust that you will be inclined to agree.

The images of Salt and Light are important today for several reasons: chief among them the fact that the church as too frequently abandoned them. If the early Celts can be called Salt and Light then the modern church might be likened to chocolate syrup - a sticky additive to the culture that helps to disquise the flavor of what is underneath: or perhaps a tranquilizer - a tablet, the effect of which is to dull the impact of reality and allow the patient to live in a dreamy world where all is pleasant and good.

The images are important today because the role and the very existence of the institutional Church is up for grabs. I do not say that lightly. I

say it with impatience at the vast amounts of time we have already spent attempting to define the church and its role in society. And yet our time: this year: is different. I don't know how carefully you read the magazine A.D. when it comes into your home. But even a cursury perusal of the most recent issue wouldhave told you that the UPCUSA is in serious trouble. Ten years ago the Presbyterian Church was as solid as the rock of Gibralter. Our mission agencies were expanding their work on every continent and we had money in the bank. Today, we have virtually dismantled the mission of the Church: we have mature debts of 8.3 million dollars and our reserves which totalled 40 million not long ago have been reduced to 7.6 million. Indiv idual congregations such as this one are healthy - but as a national church our immediate future is not at all rosy. The question of what the Presbyterian Church will be - and what role it will play is very much up for grabs.

Locally this congregation faces a period of uncertainty: a time during which the Session will have to spell out as precisely as possible, what Bethany Presbyterian Church is and what it intends to do in the community. It is a time for individual church members to examine their commitment and to determine what it is they want to be in the name of Jesus Christ. And so Salt - Light - two very old images become rather important.

Let's look for a moment at the text. Jesus has taken the twelve up onto the mountain to teach them. His words on that occasion are called the Sermon on the Mount. He begins with the Beatitude - Blessed are the poor - the weak - Commenting on the passage Dietrick Bonhoeffer says: ".... the disciples up to this point must have thought that the blessed ones were too good to live in the world, fit only to live in heav en... B ut now Jesus calls them salt - the most indispensable necessity of life." (P.140 The Cost of Discipleship.)

"You are the Salt of the Earth" - salt was extremely precious in the first century. In that climate its preservative and purifying properties

were absolutely essentila to life. It was valued then because it brought zest and flavour to food - but because of its scarcity it was used in this manner only rarely. Finally, good salt was virtually indestructable. So it was used liturgically in many of the Temple rites - and is still used in Roman Catholic Baptism.

But when salt went bad: when it lost its power to preserve, purify and flavour, it was absolutely useless.

"You are the light of the world". - a much used image in ancient literature. Light reveals the truth: light shows the truth about a thing - a person. As is the case with salt, light is valuable only when it touches something.

Conclusion: Jesus was telling the disciples individually and corporately that to follow him - to be Christians if you will - was to preserve, purify, flavour and reveal in a way that is visible. Notice that he did not urge them to try to be like salt. He did not say "Please attempt to shine some light around Judea." He said simply, "You are the Salt of the Earth -you are the light of the world...." That is how I define my followers. When you don't act like salt and light you are not following me. When you do, you will be visible."

That, I would submit, is our Lord's own measuring rod for his church and for his people individually. Not, how much do you believe? Not, can you give assent to these doctrines? Not, can you recite the books of the Old Testament - backwards? But have you been salty? Have you been like light inthe world? And have you done it ina way so unmistakably clear that other people knew who you were and why you were doing it?

Now, no one who knows a thing about the New Testament is going to take issue with any of that. But when we get down to particulars the going will get rough. I had a conversation with a man in the locker room of the YMCA last week who wished me well in my new position, and allowed as how he used to be a Presbyterian until the Presbyterians got mixed up in politics: civil

rights - the Vietnam War - poverty - then he got out and found a church that was interested in doing God's work.

I have heard that so much I can recite it chapter and verse. I no longer get angry - but every time I hear it, It sounds more incredible than the time before. Is it possible to believe that the God who created and loves all men, doesn't care when some of his children are oppressed because of the color of their skin? Is it possible to fathom a God who is detached from tropical villages napalmed? Is it possible to know about people who are hungry in this land of affluence - about Senior Citizens dying of loneliness - and somehow to think that these problems don't matter to God? Or even more incredibly, that God has all those millions of people in his church, but that he wants them to devote their energies solely to getting more millions inside, while the world goes to hell in a hand basket.

I rather believe in a God who does care: and who wants nothing so much as for his people to start acting like the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World. I believe he cares about your problems - your hurts - and anxieties - and that he wants his people to minister to you. And I think he cares about big hurts - like wars and hunger and injustice - and that he wants his people to do something about them too.

I don't think it is possible to define some problems as secular and others as religious. William Muehl, professor at Yale Divinity School tells about talking one time with a Ph.D candidate in Urban Planning. Wishing to be a good conversationalist he asked:"Based on your study, what do you regard as the greatest unsolved problem in urban development?" The reply came quickly: "It is a religious problem." "...You see, what we are trying to do in redevelopment is build good cities. But what is a good city? Obviously it is one in which men and women can lead good lives. Now, what is the good life? That's a religious question, isn't it?" Muehl had to admit that the young man was right.

Jesus Christ has appointed us - as a church and as individuals to be the

Salt of the Earth and the light of the world. Now, I'm not going to fill in the obvious gaps at this point by telling you what precisely you should do about this problem or that. That, in Jimmy Dean's old story, is when the preacher "stops preachin and starts meddlin". Besides, I am more convinced thanever that if we really decided that we are to be Christians in the world - that if we began to act like the Salt of the Earth, God's will for us would become clearer than we ever imagined.

I would hazard the suggestion however, that the good works that will so shine that people will glorify God - begin right here: in the fellowship of the church. I would hazard the suggestion that there is nothing so conspicuous nor contagious as a love that is expressed openly within a church. "See how they love each other" is what they said in the First Century. And that's what really got to the Greeks - that was the good they saw shining from the Christian community like a beacon of purelight - forgiving, accepting love. I would hazard the suggestion that we are the Salt of the Earth when we love. Let me tell you a story to illustrate. A very dear friend of mine is in a Nursing Home. Last week she told me about one of her room mates who has no relatives, no friends, no one to come see her, no one to care. The lady was having some difficulty with her food tray and my friend volunteered to help. She did, and the lady said "I'd like to kiss you for that." My friend gave her a hug - and told me that "Her eyes lighted up and she really seemed to like that." You don't have to be on a picket line to be the Salt of the Earth, although some people need to be. You don't have to run for office. All you need to do is change things, in the name of Jesus Christ, that need to be changed - wherever and whatever they are. That's salty - and conspicuous and contagious. I left my friend and made another call even though it was late in the day and I really didn't want to.

Allow me, in conclusion, to be autobiographical in a way that is appropriate only as a man is about to leave. Intellectually I am totally committed to what I have said this morning about the Church and the Christian

Life in the World. Emotionally - pastorially I experience something else. I look out from this pulpit on faces I know and love. On any given Sunday a minister sees what no one else sees: a couple whose marriage is in trouble, a widow whose husband was buried last week and whose very presence is an act of great courage, a student who can't believe in God, a man who is losing his job. Nothing in my experience is quite as painful as knowing what I know - and preaching a sermon on human rights, or ecology, or stewardship. The pastor wants to say"God loves you - God cares about you - God is with you and will be with you." I will never forget William Laws answer to a question from the floor at General Assembly in 1970. He was a candidate for Moderator and the Assembly was grilling each of the candidates. A young man got up and asked Bill Taves what he thought about draft resisters and amnesty - and there was no more controversial issue than that one at the time. He said "That's the pastoral question and I go to bed hurting in my gut over it every night. " He said that he had in his congregation parents who had lost sons in Vietnam and parents whose sons were in Canada because their conscience would not allow them to fight. He said that God loved both of them: and that he - the pastor loved both of them: and the he hoped they knew that as he said and did what he believed God wanted him to say and do.

That's the dilemna of the preacher - and the church as it tries to be faithful in the world. And yet - the miracle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that in giving we do receive - in sacrafice we do find joy - in sharing we are given peace - in following our Lord wherever he leads - we are saved.
AMEN

FATHER: We pray for honesty and courage. Help us to stand for what we believe. Grant us the grace to be the Salt of the Earth - and the Light of the World. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN